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Durenberger accuses Cabinet officials of turning backs on Iranian arms deal

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WASHINGTON — The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee accused Cabinet-level officials yesterday of turning their backs until now on the Iran arms operation and "pretend[ing] it wasn't going on."

"Everybody who was in on the decision chose to pretend that this was an NSC [National Security Council] operation and they went about their own business and sort of ignored — I think deliberately ignored — what was going on," Senator David Durenberger, R-Minn., said.

The panel entered its second week of closed-door testimony on the Iran arms sale and the diversion of profits to the Nicaraguan "contras" yesterday and questioned Elliott Abrams, the top State Department official involved in aid to the rebels, for nearly three hours.

At day's end Mr. Durenberger said, "The puzzle's coming together and the result of that does not justify the dismantling of the republic or the current occupant of the White House."

Meanwhile, Robert Owen, reportedly an intermediary between Lt. Col. Oliver North and the contra rebels, became the third witness to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination in refusing to testify before the committee. Colonel North and Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, former national security adviser, refused to testify last week.

Mr. Owen's attorney said lawyers had had little time to confer with him since he was subpoenaed Dec. 4 and that the picture that had emerged was "complex and cloudy."

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, has said he knew about weapons supplies to the contras but could not recall where the weapons came from. He was expected to be asked about the extent of his role in contra aid as well as in solicitation of support for the rebels from other governments.

The State Department sought support from the sultan of the oil-rich state of Brunei, and Mr. Abrams is reported to have provided Brunei with the number of a Swiss bank account, obtained from Colonel North, into which the money could be put.

He refused to discuss his testimony later, but said he didn't think the current scandal would kill contra aid.

"Whatever was done wrong in Washington wasn't done wrong by the contras and it would be really tragic for them to suffer . . . There is no reason to make them victims," he said.

Commenting on the State Department's role, he said it used as well as possible the information available to it.

Mr. Abrams was among a half-dozen witnesses testifying yesterday. Most of the others were described by the committee's spokesman as "covert" CIA operatives. More such witnesses were added than had been scheduled, indicating that the CIA role in the whole affair has triggered more questions than had been expected.

Mr. Durenberger, before the day's hearings, said in response to a question that CIA Director William J. Casey had given an inaccurate and incomplete account when he ap-

peared informally before the committee Nov. 21.

"I don't know if there's ever been a situation in which Bill has been able to be totally accurate and totally complete, and I don't mean to imply that he's been deliberately inaccurate or deliberately vague," he said. This "just happens to be his approach to testifying."

Senator Durenberger said he is resisting recalling Mr. Casey to testify until the panel has "all the facts we need in order to ask appropriate questions." But he will testify again "presumably under oath . . . the first time that's happened" and will be examined "at great length."

Referring to Cabinet-level officials involved in the decision to sell arms to Iran, Mr. Durenberger said, "Each of these Cabinet-level people chose to ignore this whole thing for at least the last 11 months."

The committee has not yet received documents, including some requested from the White House late last week, that Mr. Durenberger hopes will bring it close to "closing the loop" — information gaps left by the absence of testimony from Colonel North and Admiral Poindexter. Documents from other agencies, including the State Department, have been subpoenaed.